

Rotten and Possessed

Control and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* as Models of Outmersive Game Design

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ABSTRACT

Control (Remedy Entertainment) and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory) demonstrate the potential for game design that defies expectations of immersive gameplay and embodied avatars. Building on game scholarship that recognizes ‘immersion’ as a “double-axis of incorporation” [8] consisting of a “complex interplay of actual and virtual worlds as perceived through a dually embodied player” [26, p. 73], we can see how these games achieve powerful moments of coattention through *outmersive* game design—deliberately alienating the player from an embodied avatar experience. *Outmersion*, a term coined by Gonzalo Frasca, offers a broader categorization for games that procedurally engender “critical distance” by directing player attention *to* and *outside of* the game itself [16]. This article uses close-play to explore how the characters of Jesse Faden in *Control* and Senua in *Hellblade* make use of the ‘cohabited avatar’ trope—in which the avatar is possessed by non-player entities. This article identifies shared outcomes in the outmersive design of these characters, namely that they: 1) directly invoked the player 2) complicated the player’s place in the avatar body 3) deceived the player 4) took agency from the player and 5) referenced game structures directly. Through outmersion, these games created provocative moments of player attention and reflection, simultaneously interrogating assumptions of power, rules, and embodiment. This article advocates for further exploration of outmersive game and interactive narrative design to challenge dominant presumptions about player-avatar interactions.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Software and its engineering** → **Interactive games**; • **Applied computing** → **Computer games**; • **Human-centered computing** → **Interaction design theory, concepts and paradigms**; • **Theory of computation** → **Representations of games and their complexity**.

KEYWORDS

outmersion; immersion; embodiment; cohabited avatar

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Complicating Presumptions of Embodiment

Game scholars [8, 19, 26, 30] have noted the troubled legacy of the term ‘immersive’ as an unhelpful descriptor, yet ‘immersion’ remains a widespread catchall for describing videogame outcomes. Despite an expanding vocabulary for discussing in-game immersion, videogame scholarship and criticism largely operates under expectations of unity between avatar, game, and player. This framework assumes that a game’s purpose is to provide seamless avatar embodiment, but this raises a crucial question: how do we discuss games that deliberately complicate this presumed experience of embodiment? While game and interactive storytelling scholarship has noted the affective power of games that use “twofold-play” [49], “defamiliarization” [20], “extradiegetic input/output” [34], “poetic gameplay” [33], “estrangement” [40], and “narrative surprise” [50], we lack a unified vocabulary to describe these broader experiences that drive a wedge between player and avatar, deliberately evoking distance, disconnection, and *outmersion* (coined by Frasca [17]).

This article examines two games in the action-adventure genre, *Control* (Remedy Entertainment, 2019) and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017), that have achieved critical acclaim and popular success while making use of outmersive game design. These games each revolve around complex, storied avatars: Jesse Faden in *Control*, and Senua in *Hellblade*. Yet the success of these characters is catalyzed by design that engages the player in a push-and-pull of embodiment—immersion and *outmersion*. These games both rely on an outmersive design trope: the cohabited avatar. By using avatars that are possessed by actors other than (and indicative of) the player, both titles promote self-awareness, complicate embodiment, and even confuse and betray the player: procedurally engendering critical distance. These tactics do not simply ‘break’ with immersion, but create new avenues for manipulating the player’s gaze across the “continuum of attentional intensity” [8]. Ultimately, I argue that cohabited avatars demonstrate outmersive game design that extends previous definitions of dissonating gameplay: opening the door to *outmersion* as a vague-yet-useful lens for gameplay that complicates embodiment.

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2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 The Problem of Immersion

Game scholars have interrogated the term ‘immersion’ and argued for new specificity—noting its frustrating broadness. Calleja breaks down the distributed legacy of immersion and how it “refer[s] to experiential states as diverse as general engagement, perception of realism, addiction, suspension of disbelief, identification with game characters, and more” [8, p. 25]. He proposes an alternative model for thinking about consciousness and presence in games: a multi-axis framework for ‘incorporation,’ consisting of six axes of involvement (*ludic, spatial, narrative, affective, shared, and kinesthetic*) between player and game. This model breaks with the one-way trajectory of immersion popularized by Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck* [36]. Calleja suggests that “incorporation occurs when the game world is present to the player while the player is simultaneously present, via her avatar, to the virtual environment” [8, p. 169]. This approach also expands Bogost’s methodology for observing how video games rhetorically engage players by looking beyond gameplay to examine materiality and networks of involvement [7]. Calleja’s complication of the player-game (and player-avatar) relationship is contextualized by a new materialist understanding of gaming following Taylor, who argues:

We do not simply play but are played. We do not simply configure but are configured. In the long run, this is not meant to be a one way descriptive street but instead an approach that suggests a circuit of relations that runs across a number of actors, human and non, conceptual and material [44].

Taylor’s “circuit of relations” is useful for thinking about the ways that gameplay is constructed across actors and Calleja’s axes of involvement. Mukherjee has similarly used this frame in his discussion of a “zone of becoming” between the virtual and non-virtual player that acts as “a multiplicity where different identities, events and actions coexist and influence each other even as they are constantly actualized as options in the game” [35, p. 214]. Both Taylor and Mukherjee push for thinking about gameplay and player experience as a network; identification and embodiment take place within a complex zone of involvements, interactions, and actors.

This is extended by Keogh’s *A Play of Bodies*, in which he notes that “immersion is a situated and sensorially dependent outcome of videogame experience, not its antecedent” [26, p. 53]. Keogh advocates for a “phenomenology of video game experiences” that recognize the relationship between game and player as a “textual circuit” [26, p. 64]—codifying the materiality of gameplay. He describes numerous examples of how games are designed to negotiate layers of player “coattention” (both to the physical and virtual space) and how playing games is a “complex interplay of actual and virtual worlds as perceived through a dually embodied player” [26, p. 73]. This resonates directly with Calleja’s notion that “various forms of experience that make up immersion need to be considered as located on a continuum of attentional intensity” [8, p. 167]. Keogh’s emphasis on the materiality of the game and locating immersion within the “ebb and flow of attention” [26, p. 64] is especially important, as it addresses a criticism of Calleja’s framework

by Cox et. al, who note in their study of *Wii Mario Kart* players that immersion was largely impacted by the brightness of the testing room—something not accounted for in Calleja’s model [11]. Cox et. al argue “immersion therefore cannot simply be a function of the player involvement model... immersion is in fact the ‘attention’ that Calleja describes as moving around the player involvement model” [11, p. 348].

Evidently, any discussion of immersion is doomed to oversimplification and yet the use of increasingly specific definitions to delineate ‘immersion’ from ‘presence’ / ‘incorporation’ / ‘embodiment’ / ‘involvement’ has resulted in disparate discourse and reduced legibility. I find it productive to operate from a standpoint that unites these interpretations, particularly Calleja’s “continuum of attentional intensity” and Keogh’s “ebb and flow of attention.” To this end, I define immersion as the *game-network’s direction of player attention through the game and avatar*.

2.2 Defining Outmersion

Each of the above approaches operate under the assumption that immersion is an implied goal—a virtue—of videogames, in what Salen & Zimmerman call the “immersive fallacy” [45]. Calleja writes that ‘incorporation’ is a highly ephemeral experience, “slipping back into involvement the moment any dimension requires the player’s full, conscious attention... Intrusions from sources unrelated to the game environment detract attention from the game, undermining involvement and thus incorporation” [8, p. 171]. While Calleja argues for a complex model of incorporation, his argument is still founded on the idea that incorporation is ideal. Similarly, Keogh asks that we “accept and account for the videogame in all its embodied and material messiness,” but his case studies clearly mark successes and failures to direct attention through game interfaces [26]. While Keogh’s “dual circuit” model of attention allows for nuanced discussions of immersion, it is worth expanding this model further by looking at game elements that deliberately *outmersion* players. ‘Outmersion’ is a term coined by Gonzalo Frasca in a 2008 article (hosted on a now-defunct site) [17]. Frasca’s early work on agency and immersion draws on dramatic theorists Brecht and Boal, whose work was “intended to break immersion in order to make the spectators view the representation from a... critical distance” [16, p. 173]. Frasca projects this idea onto videogames that similarly engender ‘critical distance’ in the player—a concept that ultimately grew into his framework for outmersion. Frasca describes outmersion as a part of absorption and reflection by the player. As Larsen & Walther summarize:

- **Outmersion:** “analyzing from a distance, not being presently involved in the game activity”
- **Mechanical Outmersion:** “critical analysis of mechanics and rules”
- **Fictional Outmersion:** “analyzing the coherency of the fiction/narrative—similar to ludonarrative dissonance”
- **Meta-Outmersion:** “learning strategies outside the game applicable to everyday life” [29].

This model of outmersion imagines the player moved to critically examine the game itself “from a distance”—considering the rules, structures, story, and underlying facets of the game. While Frasca is concerned with the applications for critical thinking, this approach

yields new implications when applied to player expectations of embodiment. If ‘immersion’ is the catchall for player experiences of high in-game attention, then we might see ‘outmersion’ (broadly) as the opposite: a severing, a *dissonance* of the player and game / avatar. I argue that outmersive game design distances the player from the game *by breaking their attention: drawing it to or outside the game*. I pose ‘outmersion’ as a useful frame deliberately because of its vagueness. Outmersion serves not as concrete litmus tool, but as a zone of possibility: a rallying point for the multiform branches of game design that involve dissonance, alienation, and critical distance.

2.3 The Legacy of Outmersion

Games that make use of outmersive design are widespread and often attract scholarly discussion for their subversive elements. For example, Grace unpacks *NieR:Automata* (PlatinumGames), in which the player must “fight” the final credit sequence and even offer to delete their own save data in the secret ending [20]. Grace cites this experience as being rooted in the poetic form of defamiliarization, as players rethink the structures of the game, noting how this allows *NieR:Automata* to “serve a greater function of not only unsettling the player’s expectations, but challenging the player to create new interpretive frameworks in the space vacated by those expectations” [20, p. 6]. This undermining of player expectations resonates with the idea of poetic gameplay put forth by Mitchell; game design “that draws attention to the form of the game, and by doing so encourages the player to reflect upon and see that structure in a new way” [32, p. 2]. Mitchell et. al went on to research participant experiences with games like *The Stanley Parable* and *The Graveyard*, and found that players were reflective in considering gameplay disruptions, ultimately noting that “these observations suggest that for a game to be effectively poetic, the way that the interaction and gameplay are made strange needs to be *unfamiliar in a meaningful way*” [33, p. 15, emphasis original]. Whitby et al., similarly, asked players to reflect on moments in games that had shaken their perspective with ‘narrative surprise’ and note the impact of these moments in player reflections [50]. Citing games such as *Metal Gear Solid*, in which the players must physically unplug their console controller and use a different port to defeat a boss, they write that “there is very little empirical work on what gameplay moments players perceive to be perspective-challenging [or] why these moments challenged their perspective” [50, p. 339]. While Whitby et al. are concerned with player reactions to “narrative surprise,” many of the games they categorize as being “emotionally challenging” (i.e. *Doki Doki Literature Club*) or having “narrative reveals” (i.e. *Metal Gear Solid V: Phantom Pain*) demonstrate the affective power of outmersive game design [50]. They note how these games subverted player expectations and write that “situations that challenge the player’s perspective can lead to endo-transformative reflection” [50, p. 346]. Pötzsch provides an in-depth overview of how Brecht, Boal, and Shklovsky’s frameworks have been deployed in game studies to approach estrangement [40]. Waszkiewicz likewise notes Brecht and Boal in their history of fiction-aware and fourth-wall-breaking characters who address their players directly in what they call “twofold-play” [49].

These frameworks—Brecht’s ‘alienation effect’ and ‘poetic defamiliarization’—have been in use for centuries in criticism of theatre, literature, and interactive fiction [18]. Yet the varied ancestry of these terms has led to further separation; it is difficult to delineate between, say, ‘poetic’ and ‘alienating’ gameplay. These frameworks exemplify the larger, productively generalizable phenomenon of outmersion: ‘poetic gameplay,’ ‘defamiliarization,’ ‘twofold-play,’ ‘alienation,’ and ‘narrative surprise’ show the important—if dissimilar—body of extant work on experiences of critical distance in gaming. These studies indicate the power of outmersive design, as players reflect, often with frustration or shock, at instances of interruption. But these frameworks alone are limited in their capacity to address complex tropes of outmersive design, like the coinhabited avatar.

2.4 The Coinhabited Avatar

The coinhabited avatar is a game design trope in which the player avatar is possessed by another consciousness, shared between bodies, or ‘corrupted’ by an outside narrative agent. The relationship between avatar and player is troubled by the presence of other actors—a ghost, a god, or voices—that deliberately threaten the supposedly immersive embodied experience of kinesthetic involvement and control. For example, Warren notes the game *Baten Kaitos: Eternal Wings and the Lost Ocean* (Bandai Namco, 2003), in which the player is a summoned entity who possesses the character of Kalas and guides him through the narrative [48, p. 38]. At the end of the game, however, Kalas rejects the player, saying “Your game is over. Go back to your world now” [48, p. 39]. Warren uses this example to refute Waggoner’s framework [47] that idealizes “one’s avatar as a vessel of individual expression” [48].

This motif has a long legacy, from Faulkner’s unstable “I” in literature [18] and Boal’s “spect-actor” in dramatic theory [16, 40] to *Metal Gear Solid* [51]. Bell & Ensslin have noted how early interactive fiction often experimented with the blurring of characters and implicating the reader [6, 14]. Early console games expanded this trope; in Nintendo classic *Super Mario 64*, for example, Mario is accompanied by his cameraman Lakitu, who serves as a stand-in for the player’s POV. An inclusion originally made by designers concerned that players would not understand the third-person perspective [4]. This is an example of a coinhabited avatar: the player is not controlling just Mario, but the coentangled network of Mario and his cloud-carried-cameraman. Use of game mechanics to justify the narrative and interface is a common trope, as Kleinman et al. note [9]; here, the designers included an express reminder of the materiality of the game—which is inherently *outmersive*—to justify the interface of the game’s third person POV, helping unfamiliar players feel embodied. The coinhabited avatar has seen countless iterations across ludography, such as Geralt of Rivia being possessed by a party-ghost in *The Witcher 3* (CD Projekt RED, 2015) and Byleth being possessed by a goddess in *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (Nintendo, 2019).

The coinhabited avatar not only complicates player expectations of immersion, but combines extant discourse on defamiliarization, the fourth wall, and narrative surprise. *Control* and *Hellblade* use the coinhabited avatar to do more than merely justify their interfaces.

In each case, the coinhabited avatar creates moments of player engagement through outmersion by underscoring their distance from the heroine and game. This effect is political: provoking players to think about their presumed embodiment, recognize their own gaze, and question their power and control over the avatar. This challenges the voyeurist legacy of (especially femme) avatars in third-person adventure games. Digital race scholar Lisa Nakamura, for example, has discussed femme avatars as “objects of interactivity,” and notes that visual digital media creates challenges of power [38]. She writes: “while the difference between the viewer and the viewed, the producer/artist and the subject/model, was clear in more traditional art... it is not so clear when discussing networked digital media” [38, p. 16]. Feminist game scholars have sought new models that “refuse the totalization of male gaze” and reframe “gaze as a praxis that players can adopt, learn, and develop throughout their moments of play” [23]. Outmersive game design can achieve this by calling out the gamic gaze [39] and evoking distance, creating stories about complex heroines that focus on “complex mental issues and vulnerability”—what Engelbrecht calls the “new lara phenomenon” [13]. Phillips notes that the gamic camera can be used to “call into question the reality of the events that a camera can show the spectator,” ultimately subverting the ‘penetrative’ cinematic gaze [39, p. 115]. The coinhabited avatar invites interrogation of these relationships; as avatars project back onto their players and other entities fight for control, these design elements offer new possibilities for nuance, attention, and interruption.

3 METHODS

3.1 Close-Playing for Context

Close-play for analysis is an established practice in game studies [12, 27, 28, 42] in examining themes, deployment of procedural rhetoric [7], and the shaping of player experiences. This study involved close-playing *Control* and *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* in order to excavate the trope of the coinhabited avatar. In close-playing with attention to outmersive game design, it is important to consider what Salter [42] and Chang [10] note as attention to the larger context of play with consideration for the full “game narrative assemblage” [44]. I’ve tried to document crucial narrative circumstances and also the way that less visible elements (like HUDs and loading screens) interact in creating outmersion. Finally, it was important to examine *Hellblade* and *Control* together, to draw attention to the design structures of the coinhabited avatar trope beyond a singular interpretation.

4 ANALYSIS

4.1 Unpacking Player Provocations

Control (Remedy Entertainment, 2019) is a third-person action-adventure in which the protagonist, Jesse Faden, “cleanses” a shifting building called the Oldest House, operated by the Federal Bureau of Control (FBC). Nominated for over 80 awards, and recently released on PC and next-gen platforms, the game has achieved commercial success for its exploration, art design, and bizarre narrative. Like a cross between the *SCP Wiki* and *Warehouse 13*, the FBC investigates and collects paranormal objects ranging from a murderous fridge to a teleporting slide projector. Jesse finds herself

its new director, and must drive out a hostile, corruptive force called the Hiss.

Like *Control*, *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* (2017, Ninja Theory) is a third-person action-adventure game—albeit in the dark fantasy and hack-and-slash subgenres. Senua, the protagonist, is a Celtic warrior who must travel through the Norse underworld to bring the head of her dead lover, Dillion, to Hela. Senua experiences psychosis, and throughout the game, she (and the player) hears guiding and taunting voices in a 360-degree soundscape. *Hellblade* has won critical acclaim and scholarly attention for the way Senua’s psychosis is represented from a mental health perspective [15, 22], but Senua is also a powerful example of a coinhabited avatar. While Senua fights Norse deities, her true struggle is against an amorphous, corrupting entity called “the darkness.”

Despite their different themes, *Control* and *Hellblade*’s setups for this trope are strikingly similar. The Hiss and the darkness serve as platform for each game’s use of outmersive design—and there are similarities between the way these elements (Table 1) are deployed.

These elements, unpacked in the following sections, demonstrate a host of the aforementioned concepts: defamiliarization, broken fourth walls, and narrative surprise. More broadly, these elements critically distance the player—creating provocations regarding rules, power, and embodiment. As players are outmersed, they begin interrogating game structures, resulting in the following shared outcomes:

- (1) **Invoking the player directly:** Often by referring to a second-person “you” or by showing the player a message.
- (2) **Complicating the player’s place in the avatar body:** Implying the player exists outside of the protagonist.
- (3) **Deceiving the player:** Suggesting that their relationship to the game and avatar was something untrue.
- (4) **Taking or threatening to take agency from the player:** Limiting their control of a situation, thereby reducing their kinetic and narrative incorporation. This often meant interrupting player control of the avatar directly.
- (5) **Directly referencing game structures:** Referencing the ongoing story or game in such a way as to remind the player of the materiality of the experience.

By ludonarratively encoding these moments of alienation and putting the player ‘in their place’ (and not simply into the body of the avatar) the very dynamics of the game-avatar relationship fall into question. While avatar embodiment is often invisible [43], these games put it under the spotlight: the player watches their avatar die, rot, and become possessed in fights that extend into the mind of the protagonist and the structures of the game. Below, I excavate shared outcomes of the coinhabited avatar and demonstrate the affective power of outmersive design.

4.2 Invoking the Player Directly

Both *Control* and *Hellblade* open with direct references to a second-person ‘you’ that implicates the player. Hypertext fiction and digital storytelling scholars [6, 21, 34] have noted the legacy of the second person as a tool by which to “reposition the referent of the ‘you’ flexibly between virtual and actual worlds, between... implied reader, and actual reader” [14, p. 51]. A tradition extending from modernist literature and interactive fiction, ‘you’ is used both “as a

Table 1: Comparative Game Elements and Their Provocations for Players

| Outmersive Game Element | In <i>Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice</i> | In <i>Control</i> | Provocation for Players |
|--|--|--|--|
| The game features a storied, femme avatar searching a foreign place to reclaim someone stolen from her. | Senua (who is Celtic) is bringing her dead lover Dillion's head to the Norse underworld to confront Hela. | Jesse investigates the Federal Bureau of Control that took her brother, Dylan. | Players expect immersion and embodiment through shared discovery and empathy. |
| The avatar is 'possessed' by being(s) that speak to and "guide" them. The player is conflated with these entities (esp. with the second person). | Senua is guided by the voices she hears due to her psychosis. The voices refer to the player as another voice. | Jesse is guided by the voice of Polaris. Jesse refers to Polaris as an unidentified "you," implicating the player. | The player's embodied experience is contested by other agents. The player's gaze is called out and characterized [49]. |
| The protagonist blames this presence for disappearance/ harm to the person they love. | Senua believes her connection to "dark voices of the underworld" is what got Dillion killed. | Jesse believes Dylan's connection to Polaris is the reason he was taken. | The protagonist's bond with their 'guide' is projected onto the player, creating distrust. |
| The protagonist (and player) are told not to trust the entities that possess them. | Senua's father, Zynbel, tells her that listening to the dark voices will result in her death. | Dylan warns Jesse about Polaris, telling her that Polaris is "using you." | The protagonist distrusts the player's influence. In turn, the player distrusts the game. |
| The protagonist encounters and fights a duplicate self. | Senua argues with a reflection of herself in the mirror before the final fight. | Jesse must fight her evil copy, esseJ. Later, Polaris appears to her as an image of herself called Jesse Polaris. | The player's place in the avatar is further contested as the avatar is duplicated and recontextualized. |
| The game tricks the player with a structural 'lie.' | The game presents a misleading warning to the player that failure will result in permadeath. | The game rolls a corrupted credit sequence prematurely to suggest that the game has ended. | The structures of the game are defamiliarized to the player as unstable and potentially deceitful [20]. |
| The protagonist loses her final encounter. | Senua faces endless enemies and is ultimately killed. | Jesse can't stop the Hiss from destroying Hedron and is corrupted. | The player is forced to fail in order to finish the game [41]. |
| The game includes a 'narrative surprise' [50] or twist that changes the player perspective at the end. | Senua is body-swapped with Hela after the final fight, suggesting that her battle has been metaphorical. | Jesse becomes an office assistant, suggesting her time as Director has been a dream. | Narrative surprise is used to shift the player's understanding of the game's rules [9]. |
| The avatar is a site of corruption. | Senua's body and mind are increasingly consumed by the "rot" and the "darkness". | Jesse is possessed by the Hiss, glowing red and speaking in chorus. | The corruption of the avatar's body threatens player agency and control. |

means of drawing attention to and harnessing the reader's somewhat unique function in the text" [6, p. 313]. Waszkiewicz notes that the use of the second-person in videogames "creates an impression of a direct communication... [and] draws attention to and emphasizes the specific player as an agent responsible for their actions" [49]. Initially, these references to a 'you' are unspecified, but later contextualized within the game worlds. As the opening lines of *Control* and *Hellblade*, respectively, illustrate:

(Control) Jesse: "You called me, so here I am" (Remedy Entertainment).

(Hellblade) Narrator: "Hello, who are you?... It doesn't matter. Welcome. You are safe with me. I'll be right here, nice and close so I can speak without alerting the others" (Ninja Theory).

These lines provoke an interrogation of embodiment, prompting the player to ask, "who is the *you* here?" In *Control*, the player can't immediately know. The ambiguous 'you' in Jesse's internal

monologues is pervasive in the first several hours of gameplay. For example, when Jesse enters the Director's office to find the previous Director dead with a gun by his body, she says "You want me to pick it up? The murder weapon? Really?" 'You' could be an in-narrative entity, but also obliquely refers to the player who is pressing the button to pick up the gun. Jesse's invocation of a 'you' continues through into the final scene, with her last lines being: "We're in this together. You and I."

Hellblade, similarly, makes extensive use of a 'subtly vacillating you' [6, p. 316]. In the opening scene, voices speak in hushed whispers and Senua looks over her shoulder toward the camera. "They're watching... They know you're here," the voices say. Senua's gaze flickers, lingering in eye contact with the player—a move repeated throughout the game. When she reaches the land of the dead, the narrator speaks: "I know what she's thinking. I hear her thoughts." Senua snarls and lunges angrily at the camera. "Oh! She heard us..." The narrator reacts, surprised. By demonstrating

awareness of the player (addressing ‘you’ and gazing at the camera) these games call into question the player gaze—upending the “double viewing of interactivity,” to quote Nakamura [38, p. 19]. She writes that in interactive media, “Object and subject are not mutually exclusive roles: it is not possible to definitively decide who is being interacted and who is being interactive” [38, p. 35]. These games are able to deliver their messages directly to the player through these invocations. For example, after Senua loses a fight with Hela, the narrator says:

Narrator: Is this what Hel is? A world shaped by Senua’s nightmares?... what if each one of us is always dreaming even when awake?... Maybe that’s why people feared seeing the world through her eyes. Because if you believe that Senua’s reality is twisted, you must accept that yours might be too (Ninja Theory).

We see additional player-awareness here, as the narrator (theoretically, a voice in Senua’s head) speaks directly to the ‘you’ and suggests that Senua’s “twisted reality” is shared between avatar and player—separating them contextually. By ‘staring back’ at the player, these avatars break the voyeuristic presumption of embodiment, and the illusion that the player *is* the avatar. This effect has significant implications, especially for the design of videogame heroines. In *Nier:Automata*, for example, the protagonist 2B will push the player’s camera away if they try to look up her skirt, and trying to do so persistently will earn them a publicly-visible trophy called “What Are You Doing?” [5]. This recognition and interrogation of the player’s gaze is an example of “gaze as praxis” [23], as characters look back, and play back, at the player—in a way that subverts the legacy of (especially femme) avatars and the relationship between the “viewer and the viewed” [38].

4.3 Complicating the Player’s Place in the Avatar Body

Control does ultimately explain the source of its ‘you.’ Jesse confesses to the scientist Emily Pope that she is possessed by a paranormal being: “*Let’s hope you two get along...* She’s been with me ever since Ordinary, in my head. She led me to you. I call her Polaris” (Italics addressed to Polaris; Remedy Entertainment). It turns out that this ‘you’ is Polaris (she/her): an extradimensional being, represented to the player as a glassy fractal. But for Jesse to suggest that an invisible figure in her head is leading her from quest marker to quest marker implicates the player through “twofold-play” [49]. Polaris becomes a surrogate for the player’s presence—a reminder that they are an entity separate from, but entangled with, Jesse. Polaris is further complicated by her mechanical roles in the game. For one, it is explained that Jesse conveniently can’t be infected by the Hiss because she is already possessed by Polaris. Additionally, Polaris’ fractal appears as the game’s loading screen and over key objectives, making her a part of the HUD. Polaris is more than a player stand-in; she is also a dual-guide for Jesse (as a voice) and the player (as quest marker).

The player and Jesse’s relationship to Polaris shifts when Jesse meets her brother, Dylan, who was once attuned with Polaris. Dylan is possessed by the Hiss and talks in double-speak. Dylan warns Jesse: “I welcomed the Hiss. I let it in. To get rid of *her*. The Hiss set me free. Polaris is using you... You are a puppet” (Remedy

Entertainment, emphasis original). Dylan’s invocation not to trust Polaris exposes the complexity of her narrative role. By telling Jesse to reject Polaris, Dylan is also questioning Jesse’s relationship to the player. This provokes the player who, despite being unable to hear Polaris, has been following her between quest markers.

In *Hellblade*, Senua not only meets the player’s gaze, but the game implies that the player is one of the many voices in Senua’s head. These voices taunt her, guide her, and discuss her decisions. Their messages conflict: “It’s dangerous!” “Touch it!” “It’s going to hurt you!” Like Polaris’ guidance as a visual marker for the HUD, the voices give responsive feedback (shouting “Behind you!” or “Be careful!”)—guiding both Senua and player. But the setup of the voices puts the player in a precarious situation for thinking about embodiment. After all, they believe they are playing *as* Senua—and yet the implication that the player is a voice, one she directly acknowledges and even becomes enraged with, complicates that embodiment. The player’s gaze and place are called out, questioned, and recontextualized: the player is at once a spectator, a guide, and a voice among many, not to be trusted.

These moments of self-awareness create provocations for players. Polaris’ role as a player ‘stand-in’ has not gone unnoticed, and is commonly called out in online fan spaces. As one comment on *Control*’s wiki says: “Anyone think we (the game player) are represented by the Polaris entity? The player is the one who grants Jessie [sic] her powers and completes the missions with her. Also, the entire game it feels like she’s breaking the fourth wall when she speaks to Polaris” [3]. Another user similarly began a Reddit thread noting the creepiness of being called out as the player: “That thought gave me such an immersive experience and totally changed the way I felt about the game. It gave it such a semi-creepy, fourth-wall-breaking vibe that I hadn’t really experienced in a game in recent years” [37]. These player’s reactions highlight the way that Jesse’s coinhabited avatar can be, at once, “fourth-wall-breaking” and “immersive.” The player no longer *is* the avatar, instead they are a whisper, a possession, an *influence*. This move interrogates the player’s presumptions and reverses their expectations; “playing the player,” as T.L. Taylor has suggested [44]. By severing the connections across the “textual circuit” [26, p. 64] of player / avatar / game, these games create powerful moments of attention through outmersion—simultaneously breaking the fourth wall, defamiliarizing the player, and providing narrative surprise. Unlike Mario’s Lakitu camera-man, these complexities add suspicion, distance, and drama to the gameplay: players listening to the ‘other voices’ gossip about Senua are implicated in her distrust of the voices; Dylan’s demand that Jesse reject Polaris makes the player uncomfortable since they feel they *are* Polaris. Shaw has noted that “the distance between player and avatar complicates how we think about embodiment” [43, p. 140-1]. Shaw writes that players interact differently with game avatars that are set, storied characters. This outcome of the coinhabited avatar trope—placing the player outside the heroine—grants the heroine agency over her own narrative (since her role is made distinct from the player) and encourages player-protagonist identification by emphasizing the player’s role as a spectator [43, p. 107].

4.4 Deceiving the Player

In the final confrontation of *Control*, Jesse fails to protect a conduit for Polaris called Hedron, and as it is destroyed, her connection to Polaris is severed. In a cutscene that follows, Jesse is possessed by the Hiss; the screen cuts to black and the credits roll. But the credits change: the names of developers warp into Hiss incantations. The credits are soon distorted and illegible, as the corruption extends to the structure of the game. *Control* connects Jesse and the game's structure through outmersion by building up to a moment of severance: the player watches in horror as the Hiss steal the game's ending. But this credit sequence is a feint—the game does not end there. The corruption of Jesse's avatar and the game is then used to create a complex endgame. The credits stop and the game begins again, only Jesse is an office assistant. Everyone around her is giving orders to file this, fax this, clean this. The other characters are narratively recontextualized, acting as if they don't know Jesse. Emily, the scientist, says: "There's the new girl. Standing around daydreaming. Who the hell does she think she is? The Director?" (Remedy Entertainment).

Hellblade performs a structural feint through its promise of permadeath: that after several failures, the game file will be made unplayable and the player's saved data deleted. As Senua reaches the gates of Hel, a cutscene plays in which her arm rots away. As she tries to open the gates, the camera pans up to the sky and bold text reads: "THE DARK ROT WILL GROW EACH TIME YOU FAIL/IF THE ROT REACHES SENUA'S HEAD, HER QUEST IS OVER/AND ALL PROGRESS WILL BE LOST" (Ninja Theory). Permdeath is not an uncommon mechanic in roguelike and hack-and-slash games. *Hellblade* delivers this paranoia to clarify the stakes for the player, pulling them into a threatened embodiment: if the player fails, Senua will die. By panning the camera upwards to an "extradiegetic" [34] tutorial message, player attention is briefly drawn to the game systems directly. But this does not break the player's immersion. Instead, by briefly drawing their attention to an out-of-narrative warning, the game redirects player attention to in-game danger. To interject personally, in my first playthrough of the game, I frequently paused and restarted fights rather than let Senua die—afraid to let the rot spread.

Yet, when data miners and testers investigated the game's code, they were surprised to find that *there is no permadeath mechanic* [46]. Tameem Antoniades, creative director at Ninja Theory, has since admitted that *Hellblade's* permadeath promise is misleading: the rot does spread throughout the game—but never reaches Senua's head or results in lost progress. All this rests (again) on the 'you;' the designers expect the player to assume the 'you' refers to them when it actually refers to Senua. The rot spreads not upon *player* failure, but on fixed narrative moments where Senua fails herself. Antoniades has said this wording "was chosen quite carefully because we didn't want to lie to the player" and that it was "your interpretation of the message that is what threw people off" [1]. And so, like *Control's* 'you'—which vacillates between Polaris and the player—*Hellblade* uses the ambiguity of who 'you' are within the player-avatar-game circuit in order to deceive the player into an increased experience of embodiment. But for players who learn that this is a deception, there is a new layer of outmersion: as they realize they have been deceived by the game and were made

afraid for nothing (although this, in itself, is a powerful moment of attention [31]). Like the fake credit sequence of *Control*, this is outmersive game design that is willing to openly mislead the player via structural mechanisms, using the complexity of the coinhabited avatar. By providing a giant warning of permadeath as a feint, the game dually-wields immersive and outmersive design.

While most videogames rely on player-avatar distance to make room for failure [25, 41], *Hellblade* uses the permadeath feint to immerse players in Senua's fears. In both cases, the coinhabited avatar becomes entangled by the threat of corruption (the Hiss and the darkness) but also with the game structures themselves. While Jesse is corrupted, the game itself is wronged. Similarly, if Senua becomes corrupted, the game will (allegedly) undo itself. While these elements are highly self-aware, these deceptions engage players by threatening their ludic involvement (ending the game or destroying data). These white-lies of design are sustained by the complexity of these characters and their relationships to the player, who is driven to ask: *Is that really the end? Will I lose my progress?* This emphasis on deception underscores the political messages of these games. Senua's tragic backstory revolves around her father and fellow villagers collectively gaslighting her into believing that she is unstable and cannot trust herself. Likewise, Jesse holds a contentious relationship with the people of the FBC, who have continually lied to her about what happened to her brother. Much like Brecht and Boal's dramatic framework, inclined to teach spectators to view the conditions of their own oppression [16, 40], the deception of these games' structures resonates with each character's own narrative relationship with institutional authority.

4.5 Revoking Player Agency

The previous examples of deceiving the player structurally are also indicative of another outcome: stripping players of their agency. They are also perhaps the most extreme examples of this, and both in-game moments are foreshadowed by additional limitations imposed on player agency. Jesse's corruption by the Hiss pushes the player away at multiple levels. As the unskippable cutscenes of Jesse's failure and the fake credits roll, the player is first thrust from their success (ludic involvement), then the avatar (kinesthetic and spatial involvements), and then the game itself [8]. During the final sequence of *Control*, the false credits break the fourth wall and the subsequent scene dramatically recontextualize the game's story (a 'narrative surprise' for certain [50]). Severed from their connection to Polaris, the player and Jesse are now powerless: stuck doing mundane office tasks. With a startling twist to both gameplay and narrative, the player is provoked by endless questions as they run around making copies and cleaning coffee mugs. *Is this the true context for Jesse's character? Where are my powers? Was everything else just Jesse's daydream about being Director? How long do the developers want me to play secretary?*

Hellblade strips players of their agency at numerous moments, including the previously mentioned cutscene when Senua reaches the gates of Hel. After Senua's arm rots, the game's first enemies appear and never stop spawning. When the player inevitably misses a dodge, Senua is struck down, and the player is forced to watch her die, screaming in agony. The camera then pans out to show another Senua, still alive, staring at her own body. "A vision, of

what's to come? Poor Senua," the narrator says. This moment is a forceful limitation of player agency, as the player must witness Senua's gruesome demise in the first hours of the game. This echoes Engelbrecht's analysis of recent *Tomb Raider* games, in which she argues that "Lara's gruesome deaths increase her sense of vulnerability and her realism as a character, which is a transformation from the invincible postfeminist 'supergirl'" [13]. In this case, by forcing players to lose and witness Senua's violent death, the game exchanges the player's ludic involvement for Senua's narrative complexity. *Hellblade* doubles down on this in the final fight, as Hela releases an endless wave of enemies. Whenever Senua is struck, the voices implore her: "Let go of your battle. Stop. You're killing yourself." This sequence cannot end until the player stops fighting and Senua is killed violently by Hela. This moment delivers the affective power of the coinhabited avatar: to 'win' the final fight, the player must surrender (despite previous threats of permadeath). This is a direct dismissal of ludic involvement, and as such, should signal a break with immersion [8]. Instead, this moment reinforces the central message of Senua's psychological struggle, as the player must—like her—accept the loss they have avoided for so long.

These scenes carefully control both player attention and agency—signaling where the player is spectator (watching helplessly) and where they are actor within the network of the coinhabited avatar. These endings don't only perform "narrative surprise" [50] but ludic reversals. As Jørgensen writes that "reversals by design" in videogames evoke "a sense of drama connected to the sudden realization that the player is actually complicit, which then piques curiosity and an interest for continued play" [24]. As the player's attention is drawn to the shift in the "mechanical contract" of each game, they are provoked by the "excitement or anxiety" of the reversal [24]. When *Control* (ironically) strips player control away at the end of what is expected to be the final fight, the player is drawn to feelings of frustrated betrayal and helplessness—but in doing so, their attention is drawn to the same betrayal and helplessness Jesse is feeling. *Hellblade* does the reverse: putting the player in control of failing the final encounter with Hela, requiring them to be the one to give up in an endless fight. The player here might angrily ignore the voices, fruitlessly hoping that there is some special victory that they can achieve. As the endless battle goes on, this frustration with the game (and lack of agency) brings them into emotional resonance with Senua, who angrily holds on to a futile quest. Inevitably, the player is prompted to ask *does the game want me to lose?*

As *Hellblade*'s oft-quoted mantra says, "The hardest of battles are fought in the mind." *Hellblade*'s endgame highlights this motif: it is not by mastery of controls or the mystic sword that the final fight is won, but by acceptance and surrender. Senua's quest to make peace with death requires the player to, themselves, make peace with a paradoxical failure [41]. Likewise, *Control* players who have spent the whole game acquiring new abilities and powers for Jesse must complete mundane office tasks to progress to the final fight. But this too is part of Jesse's narrative journey against overdetermination: Jesse has spent the whole game being told what to do (by Polaris, by the Board, and by the previous Director). For Jesse (and the player) to recover her agency, she must (literally) find herself by reconnecting with Polaris—who appears as a reflection of Jesse. Both scenes pause the climactic action to let the player sit

in discomfort and reflect—the meta-outmersion Frasca describes [17].

4.6 Directly Referencing Game Structures

While references to the player and use of structural feints (false credits, the permadeath lie) are already self-aware, both games also make direct references to their own structures—*Control* to its gaminess, and *Hellblade* to its story. During the sequence in *Control* in which Jesse is reverted to an office assistant and stripped of her powers, she receives a call from another character, Dr. Darling, who says: "I have sad news. Hedron is gone now. But it was not a source, it was a catalyst. Do you understand? You must go to my office. The endgame. It will be revealed" (Remedy Entertainment). At this point, the dialogue cheekily calls out the game-narrative sequence directly. Dr. Darling's reference to the 'endgame' indicates how the design of Jesse's coinhabited avatar is entangled with the structures of *Control*. As Jesse travels into the final fight with the Hiss, Dylan's voice taunts: "My sister had this dream. A bad dream... I knew I had to end her dream. I had to wake her up." This amplifies the stakes of the game, as Dylan threatens to turn the entire narrative into a dream that never happened. As the final showdown commences, Jesse receives a message from the Board that says "< #**/ENDGAME DICTATES SPECIAL TRANSMISSION/ALLOCATION >"—another fourth wall broken. Other moments reinforce this: in "Sankarin Tango" (a song from the original soundtrack) the lyrics (sung in Finnish) are self-aware: "In the game this fool is beaten again and again" [2]. In the "AWE" DLC, the player can find an arcade machine in the FBC's Investigations Sector called *SHŪM* that plays challenge-mode minigames. During these challenges, Jesse and the environment are briefly retro-stylized and pixelated, and can die without consequence. After playing, Jesse comments, "videogames are so realistic these days" (Remedy Entertainment).

Hellblade, likewise, references Senua's "story." In the opening monologue the narrator tells the player: "Let me tell you about Senua. Her story has already come to an end but now, it begins anew" (Ninja Theory). Another reference to *Hellblade*'s 'storiness' comes in the final narration of the game:

Narrator: This is where my story once began... it has to end here. Because I cannot see further than this.

Senua (looking at the camera): Follow us. We have another story to tell.

Narrator: My friend, go with her. This will be your story to witness. Goodbye (Ninja Theory).

While this moment may be an allusion to *Senua's Saga: Hellblade 2* (Ninja Theory) releasing later this year, what is more significant is the self-awareness. The departure of the narrator, and the 'story' presented here, exposes the game's narrative backbone.

Both Jesse and Senua are unafraid to reference their own gamic and storied contexts—an awareness that breaks immersion and narrative involvement by drawing user attention to the materiality of each game. This outcome extends the coinhabited avatar; Jesse's commentary about videogame realism is a humorous moment of bonding with the player, but also gives her agency as her sarcasm signals awareness of the game she's in. Instead of the player simply watching Jesse die repeatedly in brutal challenges, Jesse plays her own minigames. Similarly, when Senua invites the player to "follow

us,” this breaks the fourth wall and suggests that the player *requires* such an invitation to join her on further adventures—reinforcing the player placement as a voice or spectator, rather than the owner of Senua’s narrative (and avatar). Notably, both games end with wide-angle shots of the heroine, as the camera rapidly retreats: the player’s presence, no longer required as a “spect-actor” [16, 40], is dismissed. By going meta and acknowledging the game and narrative structures around them, Senua and Jesse take ownership of their games. The coinhabited avatar, in this sense, directs player attention both *to* (as in *SHŪM*) and *beyond* (as in Senua’s sequel tease) the game, creating another layer of distance from which to encourage player reflection.

5 CONCLUSION

5.1 The Case for Outmersion

Control and *Hellblade*’s uses of the coinhabited avatar are complex—especially regarding their implications for the “ebb and flow” of player attention [26, p. 64]. Outmersive game design rarely exists for the purpose of solely alienating the player, but rather to create co-attentive moments through a push-and-pull effect. While *Control* boasts a fluid control scheme, fast and brutal combat, and exploratory gameplay based on collectibles and secrets (features that grab and maintain attention *through* the avatar), it is also unafraid to complicate and interrupt the embodied experience of the player (drawing attention *to* the avatar and the game itself). Jesse, as an avatar, becomes a site of contestation just like FBC and the game. Similarly, though *Hellblade* contains impressive 360-audio, a minimal HUD, and cinematic graphics and camera-use—it is also not afraid to alienate its player by lying to them or speaking to ‘you’ directly. *Hellblade* uses the coinhabited avatar to negotiate its relationship with player failure, as the player’s attention is drawn first through the game and its danger and then to and outside the game when that danger turns out to be illusory.

The coinhabited avatar is entangled with many of the established findings on critical distance in games and interactive storytelling. The examples I’ve provided demonstrate extant concepts such as “making strange” [40], “twofold-play” [49], and “poetic gameplay” [32]. The outmersive design of these games likewise operates across mechanical (permadeath systems) and narrative (use of second-person) components. In both games, these layers are overlapping—enabled by the nuance of Jesse and Senua as coinhabited avatars. I have drawn, with limited scope, from many disparate frameworks for examining dissonance / alienation / defamiliarization to highlight their shared possibility in *drawing player attention to and outside the game interface*. I have employed frameworks rooted in game studies, but also literature, drama, cinema, and hypertext. It is my hope that game and hypertext researchers will find ‘outmersive design’ a flexible lens by which to bridge the distributed discourse on critical distance in gaming and interactive narrative. As I’ve shown, outmersive design is persuasive (in Bogost’s sense[7]): as the entire game-narrative assemblage [44] flexes to push and pull player attention across the textual-circuit of gameplay [26]—both through and *at* the avatar/game interface. Notably, outmersion did not always destroy the immersive potential of these games—but operated in tandem with it. The Reddit user who noted Polaris’

role as a stand-in for the player wrote that they were simultaneously ‘creeped out’ and ‘immersed.’ This synergy is crucial—when games draw our attention to or outside the interface, our attention is still being held. These games deploy outmersive and immersive design hand-in-hand to guide the player’s gaze and provoke them to reevaluate their presumed embodiment—resonating with each game’s rhetorical goals.

5.2 Interrogations and Implications

I have shown how *Control* and *Hellblade*’s coinhabited avatars serve as case studies in outmersive design. Jesse and Senua are not merely vehicles for player embodiment in a game world, but characters that challenge and refute player expectations of immersion by drawing attention to and outside the game. *Hellblade* is a game about self-doubt and determination; by destabilizing the player’s experience, the game severs the connection between Senua and the player to evoke these same sentiments. *Control* is a game about mystery and exploration. In building layers of uncertainty between Jesse and the player, the game reinforces the motive for investigation, making the player and game themselves a site of conspiracy. These opportunities both complicate immersion and drive new political challenges. Jesse and Senua are coinhabited avatars whose influences go beyond, and “play-back” at, the player. They offer disruptive interrogations of player gaze [39], refuse embodiment, take ownership of their own narratives, and push players into “positive discomfort” [24].

These games grant the player a stake in the protagonist without assenting to their presumption that they *are* the avatar [43, p. 142]. They elicit critically reflective questions: *Am I really in control here? Have I been in control at all?* In the case of *Hellblade*, such questions even extend to the rules of the game: *how many of these rules are real?* Outmersive design can provoke the player to 1) question power and 2) question agency—in much the same vein that the protagonists of these games do. The coinhabited avatar is a single example of an outmersive game design trope, yet I hope it can be an invitation for exploration of dissonance in gaming and interactive narrative. Further attention to design that ejects the player through outmersion will only strengthen our vocabulary for seeing, discussing, and designing gameplay that creates powerful moments of coattention, provocation, and critical distance.

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Visual-Meta Appendix

The data below is what we call Visual-Meta. It is an approach to add information about a document to the document itself, on the same level of the content (in style of BibTeX). It is very important to make clear that Visual-Meta is an approach more than a specific format and that it is based on wrappers. Anyone can make a custom wrapper for custom metadata and append it by specifying what it contains: for example @dublin-core or @rdfs.

The way we have encoded this data, and which we recommend you do for your own documents, is as follows:

When listing the names of the authors, they should be in the format 'last name', a comma, followed by 'first name' then 'middle name' whilst delimiting discrete authors with ('and') between author names, like this: Shakespeare, William and Engelbart, Douglas C.

Dates should be ISO 8601 compliant.

Every citable document will have an ID which we call 'vm-id'. It starts with the date and time the document's metadata/Visual-Meta was 'created' (in UTC), then max first 10 characters of document title.

To parse the Visual-Meta, reader software looks for Visual-Meta in the PDF by scanning the document from the end, for the tag @[visual-meta-end]. If this is found, the software then looks for @[visual-meta-start] and uses the data found between these tags. This was written September 2021. More information is available from <https://visual-meta.info> for as long as we can maintain the domain.

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gameplay and embodied avatars. Building on game scholarship that recognizes 'immersion' as a "double-axis of incorporation" [8] consisting of a "complex interplay of actual and
virtual worlds as perceived through a dually embodied player" [26,p. 73], we can see how these games achieve powerful moments of coattention through outmersive game
design—deliberately alienating the player from an embodied avatar experience. Outmersion, a term coined by Gonzalo Frasca, offers a broader categorization for games that
procedurally engender "critical distance" by directing player attention to and outside of the game itself [16]. This article uses close-play to explore how the characters of Jesse
Faden in Control and Senua in Hellblade make use of the 'cohabited avatar' trope—in which the avatar is possessed by non-player entities. This article identifies shared outcomes
in the outmersive design of these characters, namely that they: 1) directly invoked the player 2) complicated the player's place in the avatar body 3) deceived the player 4) took
agency from the player and 5) referenced game structures directly. Through outmersion, these games created provocative moments of player attention and reflection,
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